

Webster Retiring as CIA Director

By CHRISTOPHER CONNELL
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) - President Bush announced today that William Webster is retiring as director of the Central Intelligence Agency, praising Webster for proving "the value of an intelligence organization that is professionally directed."

Webster served as FBI director before taking the CIA post following the swashbuckling tenure of Iran-Contra figure William Casey.

Bush, just returned from an initial test for his hyperactive thyroid, summoned reporters to the White House briefing room for the surprise breakfast-hour announcement and a wide-ranging news conference.

The president did not announce a successor and did not say when Webster's retirement would take effect. He was asked about Robert Gates, deputy national security adviser and a longtime CIA official, and described him as a "worthy man."

Another possible successor is former CIA official James Lilley, a confidant of Bush who is leaving his post Friday as ambassador to China.

On other matters, Bush said there was "reason to be optimistic" about quiet diplomacy under way in the Middle East. And he had strong praise for Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev - this on a day Bush was meeting with leaders of the breakaway-minded Baltic republics.

"When you look at the accomplishments of Mikhail Gorbachev, they are enormous. ... I am not about to forget history. And what he did in terms of Eastern Europe, what he's done in terms of perestroika and glasnost, has my respect."

Secretary of State James A. Baker III and Soviet Foreign Minister Alexander Bessmertnykh are starting new diplomatic forays into the region this week and Bush said, "There's a lot going on and I want to stay involved myself."

The president defended himself in tough terms against allegations that he took part in an illegal 1980 effort between Iran and the Reagan campaign to prolong the captivity of American hostages and damage the candidacy of Jimmy Carter.

"The allegations about me are grossly untrue, factually incorrect, bald-faced lies," he said. "To assign a motive to a person, that he would want to keep an American imprisoned one day longer, I think is vicious."

"I can categorically deny any contact with the Iranians or anything having to do with it," said Bush.

Bush said of Vice President Dan Quayle: "I'd love to be helpful to him in any way I could. ... I want to help. I don't like to see somebody unfairly criticized."

Quayle has been in the spotlight during Bush's heartbeat episode because of concern that he is not suited to be next in line for the presidency. Bush - vice president to Ronald Reagan - said he told Quayle, "you're talking to a guy that went through something like this for about eight years."

The Washington Post _____
The New York Times _____
The Washington Times _____
The Wall Street Journal _____
The Christian Science Monitor _____
New York Daily News _____
USA Today _____
The Chicago Tribune _____
APL _____
Date **8 MAY 1991** _____

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Bush said, "I'm not about to change my mind" about Quayle, "when I see his performance and know what he's done." He said Quayle has gotten a "bum rap in the press" and accused the media of "piling on."

On other matters, Bush was asked about the review of White House travel policy in light of the travels of staff chief John Sununu. "I'm going to have some changes, and I'll announce them soon - perhaps the next 48 hours," he said.

He was asked about a report that an American plane had been fired upon over Iraq and said, "We're looking into that. Fortunately it didn't hit anybody." He reiterated that the U.S. role in helping the Kurdish refugees of Iraq is humanitarian and said, "I don't want to see us get into a quagmire."

Bush defended U.S. intelligence performance during the Persian Gulf War, saying he had "no complaints whatsoever" about the work done by the CIA and other intelligence agencies.

"So we all got criticism. CIA got a little. Defense Department got a little. We took on some water over here. But the result was superb and the intelligence was outstanding and the community performed fantastically."

Regarding the Middle East peace prospects, Bush said, "I'm moderately optimistic." Asked if he anticipated a breakthrough in Arab-Israeli disputes, he said, "I wouldn't say breakthrough, but cause for optimism. I think there's reason for optimism. I won't go into the details right now."

"You have to use some quiet diplomacy, which Secretary Baker is very effectively using." He acknowledged the disappointment that accompanied Baker's last trip to the region, but said, "I don't think it's negative. I think there is still a real opportunity here. ... I'd like to say optimism, but I don't want to go overboard on it."

Bush had praise for Webster, who appeared with him. Bush, himself a former CIA director, said, "I hate to see him go."

Webster said he was leaving "a healthy organization, one that has had during the last four years a good track record."

A former appellate and District Court judge and U.S. attorney in St. Louis, Webster, 66, served as FBI director for nine years before being named head of the CIA. Webster said that later this month he will have served 26 years in federal posts. He did not say what he would next. The president said Webster called him Tuesday evening and asked him to make the announcement.

He was chosen to head the FBI in 1978 by then-President Carter.

Webster became head of the CIA in 1987, replacing Casey, who resigned after brain tumor surgery. He was asked by Bush to keep the CIA focused on intelligence and not on policy matters. Consistent with that, Webster did not sit on the president's Cabinet.

Casey, a veteran of lengthy government service beginning with the Office of Strategic Services in World War II, was named by former President Reagan to head the CIA after managing Reagan's 1980 election campaign. He crossed swords with members of Congress who accused him of being high-handed and refusing to keep them abreast of U.S. intelligence activities.

Washington observers found the low-key Webster a sharp contrast. "After our experience with director Casey, he was just what the doctor ordered," said Rep. Anthony C. Beilenson, D-Calif., former chairman of the House Intelligence Committee.

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"I believe Bill Webster has demonstrated the value of an intelligence organization that is professionally directed," Bush said. "It is invaluable in defending the security of America."

He said of Webster: "Bill has brought an integrity, an effectiveness, and an insight to the many intelligence gathering operations of this nation. He has done a superb job."

After his announcement, Bush was asked about developments in the Soviet Union and answered with deep praise for Gorbachev.

"We have a strong, good relationship," he said.